

Hitz Says Ark. Town Not a Secret CIA Base

*Inquiry Sought by House Panel After Book
Alleged Arms, Drug Activities in the 1980s*

W. J. G.
By Walter Pincus
Washington Post Staff Writer

The CIA inspector general told Congress yesterday that he found no evidence that the agency or its personnel were associated with illegal activities alleged to have occurred during the 1980s in the Arkansas town of Mena, or at its airport.

For years there have been allegations that U.S. government agencies during the Reagan and Bush administrations used Mena airport to carry out covert operations in Central America.

CIA inspector general Frederick R. Hitz said that contract work had been done at Mena on aviation equipment owned by the CIA, and that a two-week training activity once had been conducted there with another government agency. But, he said in reference to allegations of illegality, "no evidence has been found that CIA had contact with any individuals or businesses based at, or operating through, the airport at Mena, Arkansas," including "money laundering, narcotics trafficking, [or] arms smuggling."

Hitz acknowledged that he had not attempted to investigate these charges specifically, and that his report was "based almost exclusively on information in CIA files or provided by current or former CIA employees."

The agency inquiry was requested last February by House banking committee Chairman Jim Leach (R-Iowa) after a book was published alleging the CIA was involved in arms shipments in the 1980s from Mena to Nicaraguan contra rebels, with the pilots flying back with cocaine to be sold in the United States. The book also contained allegations by a former

Arkansas state trooper that then-Gov. Bill Clinton had been told about the operation.

One of the questions posed by the committee was what the CIA relationship had been with Barry Seal, a drug smuggler and confidential informant of the Drug Enforcement Administration. Although Hitz did not place Seal's activities at Mena, his report acknowledged that in 1984, CIA technical people equipped Seal's C-123K transport plane with two 35mm cameras. Seal flew the plane to Nicaragua, where he covertly photographed an official of the Sandinista government and a leader of a Colombian drug cartel loading cocaine on the aircraft.

Those photographs subsequently were released to news organizations by Reagan administration officials trying to prove that the government they were trying to overthrow in Managua was involved in the drug trade.

CIA personnel instructed Seal on how to use the cameras, yesterday's report said, but its personnel never had "any other contact with Seal before or after this 1984 operation."

Hitz also confirmed earlier reports that former Arkansas trooper Larry Douglass Brown—a Clinton critic who was the source of reports that Clinton knew of illegal operations at Mena—had applied for a CIA job in 1984 but was rejected.

Leach's committee said yesterday it would have no comment on Hitz's report. Leach had hoped to wind up the Mena inquiry last summer, but a committee statement said delays in getting records had made that impossible. The panel, it said, is still waiting for documents requested from the Defense Department and other agencies.